Nibbana Is Better than You Think

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The Buddha said that he taught just suffering and the end of suffering. Suffering is the problem he focused on. And he proposed to solve the problem. He would be able to solve that problem inside himself. Now he’s going to teach people to solve it within themselves. It seems fairly simple. You look at all the suffering in the world and it would be really good that people not have to suffer. You see war, famine, induced war, induced famine. The things that happen in even just the human world are pretty bad. And now there are realms where it gets a lot worse. And so any teaching that would offer an end to suffering would be something that would seem to appeal to everybody. But then sometimes the Buddha talks about the implications of what it means to put an end to suffering. Talk about nibbana. And a lot of people say it doesn’t sound all that appealing. Here’s back when I gave my first study weekend here in California. The topic was the Four Noble Truths. You get to the third truth before you get to the fourth truth. The third truth is the end of suffering. And we talked about it a bit. And then we talked about the fourth truth. And we got to the right concentration in the fourth truth. Pleasure, rapture. And a number of people said, “The path sounds better than the goal.” That’s because we’re on this side of the path. In other words, we haven’t completed it yet. And the Buddha asked, “You should reserve judgment because you’re looking at things through distorted eyes. You live in a world where there is nothing but suffering. I mean, there are other things along with it, but there’s always suffering. Our minds are active, doing what we can to get away from suffering. We keep on doing a cost-benefit analysis. You put in an effort. Will it be worth it? And we feel that if it’s worth it, it has meaning. But in Nibbana, there’s no activity. There’s no doing at all. So there’s no balancing the effort versus the goal. Questions of meaning become meaningless. Listen to that from our side of things, and it doesn’t sound all that attractive. But as the Buddha said, if you had the idea that there’s anything negative about the experience of Nibbana, that would be wrong view. So reserve judgment. Take it for granted that the ability to put an end to suffering would be a good thing. And then when you get there, look around. As the Buddha said, that’s as far as he’s going to teach you. From that point on, you’re free. Free to do as you like. Once you’ve solved this problem, you’ve solved the major problem in life. Then you pass judgment from that side. From our side, we have to be careful, though. Because sometimes things get a little bit comfortable. And this is one of the ironies of samsara. We work hard, hard, hard to get things comfortable. And then as soon as things get comfortable, we get lazy. You don’t have to look to the human world. You don’t have to look for the heavenly worlds. Just look at the human world. Things get comfortable. The dog world. If dogs were all fed, they’d just lie around, as if there were nothing better to do in life. In the human realm, we start getting lazy, start getting complacent. As we get complacent, the good qualities that we need to develop to get to that comfortable spot start eroding away. If you go to the heavenly realms, it’s even more obvious. Imagine what life is like. You think of wanting something, and there it is. Want something else? There that is. You can imagine how it really corrodes you. Corrodes your character. You get lazy. You get demanding. You get a strong sense of entitlement. But it’s not going to last. You eat up all the good things you’ve done. And then you fall. This is why when the Buddha was introducing the Four Noble Truths to lay people especially, he would start out with the goodness of generosity, the goodness of virtue, and saying that these things do have meaning. But then they get rewarded. Many people are generous. Many people are virtuous. Go to the heavenly realms. And then they get complacent. And then they fall. The Buddha would then talk about the drawbacks of sensuality. What he even called the degradation of sensuality. So that you begin to see that renunciation would be a good thing. That renunciation doesn’t mean you renounce all pleasures. It simply means that you try to look for pleasure in a place that’s not involved with sensuality. Get the mind. A sense of rapture, a sense of pleasure that comes simply from being secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful thoughts. Like we’re doing right now with the breath. There’s nothing sensual about the breath. It may feel good physically, but that’s not what the Buddha means by sensuality. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Envisioning this, envisioning that. Thinking,”I would like it like this.” Well, no, maybe you’d like it like that. And you can run through all kinds of varieties of possible sensual pleasures. Here we’re trying to divorce the mind away from that because we see that it’s going to pull us down at some point. So we work on the pleasure of just inhabiting the body from within, what the Buddha calls form. How you feel the body in terms of the energy of the breath, the warmth of the body, the coolness of the liquid parts, the solidity of the solid parts. How you feel that from within, what we call proprioception. Look for your pleasure there. Because this kind of pleasure doesn’t corrode the qualities of the mind. Then from there, the Buddha would teach the Four Noble Truths. And you would see that it would be a good thing if the mind could find happiness that doesn’t involve harming anybody at all, and happiness that has no drawbacks. That’s what the Four Noble Truths are about. It’s one of the big ironies of how Buddhism comes to the West, is that people say how the Buddhist starts focusing on suffering, suffering, suffering, four truths on suffering. Well, they don’t all say just suffering. The third truth is the end of suffering. The fourth is that there are things you can do to put an end to suffering. Because otherwise, what is there? We keep coming back. And the things that seem to give meaning to life, start getting meaningless. You look after your parents to try to reward them for the goodness they’ve done for you. And then they die, and you die, and you all go your separate ways. You get other parents, and you try to repay them. And then you go your separate ways. This goes on and on and on without end. Until you look back, your parents, maybe an aeon ago, where are they now? What does that relationship mean now? Things that seem meaningful close up begin to lose their meaning from the distance. And the repetitiveness of it all. In the sense that you try to establish something, and then it gets worn away. You get established, and it’s worn away. You have to think about these things as life gets comfortable. Because there’s that tendency, even in stream-enters, to get complacent. They’re pretty secure. They have only seven lifetimes left to live. They’re not going to fall deeper than the human realm. But that doesn’t mean they’re not going to suffer between now and the time they reach full awakening. So you have to work on your hatefulness. Think about the long-term consequences of what you’re doing. Think of how much work you had to put in to get what you have now. And what are you doing with it? Fritting it away? Have some compassion on the you from the past, who worked hard to get you to this human life. You’ve got the opportunity to practice the Dhamma. The Dhamma is available. The opportunity to practice is here. So take advantage of it. As for what it means to finally put an end to suffering, what it would be like to have no more suffering, it’s really going to change your mind. I mean, the meaning we have in life is the meaning that I put in this effort. There was a lot of effort, and a lot of pain, and a lot of whatever involved. But the rewards were worth it. There was no pain involved at all. It’s something that doesn’t have to be looked after, something that doesn’t have to be repaired. It just is. When I was in Europe, I was reading a teaching from a teacher from another tradition, saying that the third Noble Truth is just your basic awareness. Not thinking, not trying to figure things out, just being aware, aware, aware of whatever’s happening. He was saying that the problem with this, what he called the third Noble Truth, was it wasn’t very interesting. That’s a horrible teaching. You’d get to nibbana and you’d be bored. That’s not it at all. But what it actually would be, not to have to do things, not to have to suffer, that’s something that’s so out of our range of what we’ve experienced so far, that it’s really hard to get our imagination around it. Which is why the Buddha said it’s not something that you should imagine, it’s something you should realize. Do what’s needed to get there, and then pass judgment. Again, as he said, he would take you that far, and from that point on you’re free. Nobody ever gets trapped in nibbana, because nibbana is freedom, in the most absolute sense. So we’re parent to have your values change as you follow the path. And it opens possibilities that otherwise would never have been open to you before. We’re not trying to get back to some earlier innocent state. Before social conditioning. As the Buddha said, we’re working to reach what has never been reached before, to attain what has never been attained before, to realize what has never been realized before. It’s going to be something radically different. And no one who has ever gotten there has ever regretted following the path that took them there. So allow that possibility to open your mind. And at the same time have a strong sense of the dangers of not opening your mind that way. That’s why the Buddha said all goodness, all skillfulness, comes from being heedful. It’s not that we’re naturally good. We’re good for a while, and then when circumstances get bad, maybe that goodness could change into something else. You have to see that where you are is very unstable, very precarious, where there is a possibility of stability and safety, if you follow the path with a strong sense of dedication, with a strong sense of heedfulness. Let the path open your mind.

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